

1536: The Münster Rebellion leaders

On this date in 1536, Bernhard Krechting, [Bernhard Knipperdolling](#), and [Jan van Leiden](#) were chained to stakes in the Münster public square, tortured with flesh-ripping tongs for more than an hour, killed with daggers thrust into their hearts, and their remains hoisted in cages in the city cathedral as a warning against any kindred misbehavior in the future.



Detail view (click for the full image) of Jan van Leiden et al being put to death in Münster. In the background, the [Lambertuskirche](#) spire shows the three cages in which the victims' remains were gibbeted.

And the point was taken: the appalling deaths of these men also marked the death of early Anabaptism's pretensions to secular political power.

These three unfortunates were the top surviving leaders of the [Münster Rebellion](#), a revolution that turned that city into an Anabaptist commune for more than a year.

Just a few years before, southern Germany had been shaken by an apocalyptic peasant rebellion led by [Thomas Muntzer](#), a sort of proto-Anabaptist.*

Though northern Germany was spared that particular maelstrom, that same

religious tension and social discontent soon blew a hyperborean wind.

In the early 1530s, [“Melchiorites”](#) — Anabaptist followers of radical preacher [Melchior Hoffman](#) — proliferated rapidly among workers of the long-prosperous but now-waning [Hanseatic](#) territories in northern Germany and the Low Countries.

And these converts did not intend the meek example of evangelical martyrdom. They meant to rule.

In 1535, Democratic-Anabaptist types stormed the Amsterdam city hall; in a separate action, others seized and fortified [a Friesland monastery](#) before being overrun. An allied movement, less theologically distinct, won temporary control of Lübeck in 1533, before being expelled by force of arms.

Only in Münster did the Anabaptists realize the full flower of their project, albeit for a very brief period of time. Winning power over the course of the year 1533 by dint of internal politicking, energetic recruitment, and fortuitous imperial distraction, Münster Anabaptists booted out the 1% and started turning the place into a visionary “New Jerusalem.”

Among those visions, the most notorious was [polygamy](#) (pdf), introduced by Jan van Leiden when he inherited leadership after the charismatic firebrand [Jan Matthys](#) died in a sortie against a siege in April 1534. The story has it that van Leiden wanted to marry Matthys’s attractive widow [Divara](#), though whether motivated by considerations of the loins or legitimacy is up to the reader’s good conscience.

There’s quite a [controversial historiography](#) surrounding their polygamous turn: while contemporary enemies were pleased to ascribe it to libertine devilries, German Communist intellectual [Karl Kautsky](#) vociferously [defended](#) the Münster Anabaptists — arguing that they resorted to polygamy for social stability when the gender disparity in the city had fallen past 3:1 owing to the vicissitudes of war.

And war, as Kautsky noted, was the commune of Münster’s essential condition, just like [that of Paris](#).

Community of goods was the basis of the whole Baptist movement. For its sake the great fight was waged at Münster. It was not, however, the chief factor in determining the character of the Münster Baptist government, that factor being the siege. The town was a great war-camp;

the demands of war took precedence of all other matters, and sentiments of freedom and equality were active only in so far as they were compatible with military dictatorship.

After a year and more under siege, Munster finally [succumbed](#) to [Prince-Bishop Franz von Waldeck](#).

Jan van Leiden, by this time dignified the “King of Jerusalem”, was taken along with two of his chief aides and designated for this superlative punishment (many others less exalted faced less exalted executions, too).



For decades after the execution, the Anabaptists' remains rotted publicly in cages on the tower of St. Lambert's — like these still displayed there to this day. [\(cc\)](#)

image from [Rüdiger Wölk, Münster](#).

For Anabaptists as a whole this catastrophe commenced a long period of [persecution](#) and reckoning. But from such travails would the movement leave its mark. Indeed, it was also in January 1536 that a young Dutch priest named [Menno Simons](#) accepted adult baptism ... and began a religious career that would make him the founding namesake of the [Mennonites](#).

Dan Carlin's "Hardcore History" podcast treats the Münster rebellion [here](#).

On this day..

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- [1892: A day in the death penalty around the U.S. South](#)
- [1886: Henry Jackson, religiously inclined](#)
- [1725: Anne Pepper, for a petticoat](#)
- [1970: Nineteen in Baghdad](#)
- [205: Plautianus, purple proximity](#)
- [1855: Emmanuel Barthelemy, duelist](#)
- [1912: Four blacks lynched in Hamilton, Georgia](#)
- [1952: Yosef Basri and Shalom Salah, Jewish bombers?](#)
- [1673: Mary Carleton, "German princess"](#)
- [1552: Edward Seymour, deposed Lord Protector](#)
- [1963: Ralph Hudson, the last man executed in New Jersey](#)

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